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ABSTRACT

A preliminary analysis of the nonverbal aspects of developing and deteriorating dating relationships was undertaken to determine what nonverbal behaviors were considered most important in defining such relationships. A checklist of 12 nonverbal behaviors associated with successful dating relationships was given to 100 male and 100 female college students, all of whom had reported having at least one "committed" ("steady") dating relationship. Half of the subjects identified, in rank order of frequency, behaviors on the checklist associated with successful relationships, while the other half used the same checklist to identify in rank order those behaviors indicating the end of a relationship. The results were generally consistent with those reported in previous literature in nonverbal communication. The power of negative nonverbal affect as a discriminator between distressed and nondistressed couples was a major finding, particularly with regard to decreases in eye contact, smiling, and laughter. The data revealed some modest sex differences, mostly in the sequencing of cues for deteriorating relationships. For males, expressions of affect disappeared before displays of affection. (RL)

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A Preliminary Study of Nonverbal Cues and Relational Termination

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A Preliminary Study of Nonverbal
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A number of communication scholars concerned with theory building in the area of interpersonal communication have recently espoused a developmental model, emphasizing communication-relevant constructs and generating hypothesis which invoke communication behaviors (Berger and Calabrese, 1975; Miller, 1978; Bochner, 1977, 1978, 1979; Wilmot, 1980). From a developmental perspective, it has been argued, the complex and diverse processes characterizing interpersonal relationships may be more precisely identified, explained, and predicted. Unified under the general rubric of relational communication, an initial series of primarily theoretical probes has fostered a steadily increasing body of empirical literature exploring various aspects of interpersonal relationships. The majority of these studies, reviewed and critiqued extensively elsewhere (Miller, 1978; Bochner, 1978, 1979) have been concerned with the initial phases of relationships and strategies of influence and control. Issues relevant to the maintenance, growth and/or decay of relationships have been largely unexplored.

The absence of an empirical literature on relational termination is compounded by an exceedingly sparse offering

of conceptual formulations. Indeed, a casual survey of interpersonal communication textbooks might invite the improbable inference that relationships simply do not come unraveled. Relational termination is, in most instances, an implied outcome of conflicts that participants in a relationship are unable or unwilling to resolve.

Given the paucity of empirical and conceptual literature on the nature of relational terminations generally, it is not surprising that the role attributed nonverbal communication behaviors in that process remains a matter composed of equal parts intuition and informed opinion. There exists an apparent consensus that in relational communication, nonverbal cues act as metamessages. That is, nonverbal messages are used to elaborate, qualify, contradict, or complement verbal or other nonverbal messages. Nonverbal cues are similarly considered significant relational definers, or means by which participants in a relationship communicate their feelings about themselves, the relationship itself, their partner, or their partners' messages (Villard and Whipple, 1976; Burgoon and Saine, 1978; Knapp, 1978). Regrettably, the consensus among scholars on the importance of nonverbal communication behaviors in the evloution of relationships has done little to stimulate investigations which would clarify our understanding of how individuals use these messages to chart their relationships

or which messages are most salient in the terminal phases of a relationship.

Two factors which contribute generously to the dilemma described above revolve around matters at once conceptual and empirical. To begin with, the aforementioned paucity of models for relational termination is problematic. The absence of models from which research hypotheses might be derived is a considerable impediment. Moreover, the few models that do exist are substantially more amenable to analyses of the verbal dynamics of relationships. Consider, for example, the five-phase model proposed by Knapp (1978) and subsequently adopted by other (e.g., Scott and Powers, 1978). Knapp posits that individuals progress through five distinct stages when disengaging: differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating. While examples of nonverbal behaviors associated with some of these stages (e.g., avoiding has obvious nonverbal implications) might be generated, the implications for soken cues are more apparent and probably more applicable as well.

On a more empirical level, the problems entailed in observing and recording nonverbal behaviors remain daunting. The costs associated with such research are often prohibitively high, and lacking established protocols for the study of ongoing relationships, are potentially risky undertakings. Taken together, these conceptual and empirical issues have sharply

limited the number and types of generalizations that may be drawn concerning the nonverbal aspects of relationship endings. The area is one to which Bochner's statement "What we need most is the direct evidence produced by substantive research" (Bochner, 1978,p.189) applies. The current analysis is a preliminary step toward that end.

Nonverbal Messages and Relational Deterioration

Available literature revealed two research traditions relevant to the present inquiry: investigations of the nonverbal behaviors which define social situations, and clinical studies of distressed marriages. Findings from each line of research yielded insights into how nonverbal cues function as metamessages.

An abundant literature in nonverbal communication has been addressed to relational messages on such dimensions as liking and affection, control, inclusion, and confirmation. Mehrabian and his associates (1972) have identified dimensions including affiliation, ingratiation, responsiveness, intimacy, distress, and relaxation. Wish's analysis of twenty social situations (1979) revealed dimensions labeled cooperativeness, formality, intensity, task orientation, and dominance. To these compilations, Burgoon (1980) recommends the addition of character and homophily, dimensions drawn from the source

credibility literature.

Studies of particular value to our current interest in relational termination are those which have focused generally on what Burgoon (1980) characterized as "positive regard messages". Behaviors which signal warmth, liking, attraction, and/or intimacy between individuals should be among those which define successful relationships. It seems reasonable to infer that the absence or progressive disappearance of such cues from dyadic interactions would indicate that the affective quality of the relationship was declining. Although none of the studies associated with this line of research have examined relational terminations directly, the findings have identified which nonverbal cues communicate relational messages.

Inspection of the nonverbal communication literature suggested that a number of kinesic, proxemic and vocalic cues were associated with attributions of positive regard. These included frequent smiling and positive affect displays (Clore, Wiggins, and Itkin, 1975; Scheflen, 1965; Givens, 1980), high levels of eye contact (Rubin, 1970, Kleinke, et. al, 1973, Kleck and Rubenstein, 1975, Givens, 1980), frequent forward leans, (Reese and Whitman, 1962; Kleinke, 1975), open and relaxed body positions (Mehrabian, 1978; Kleinke, 1975), head nodding (Rosenfeld, 1966; Clore, Wiggins and Itkin, 1975), sitting, standing or walking closer (Mehrabian, 1972; Patterson, 1976), and warm vocal tones (Clore et al, 1975, Weitz, 1972).

The potential impact of the cues summarized above upon interpersonal judgments was brought into a somewhat sharper focus in a study reported by Clore, Wiggins and Itkin (1975). These researchers gave male and female subjects a list of over 100 different nonverbal behaviors that described nonverbal liking and disliking, as expressed by a woman toward a man. Subjects were asked to identify the behaviors that would be interpreted as particularly negative and also the behaviors that would be perceived as especially positive. In order of intensity, the warm behaviors identified included direct gaze, touching, moving closer, frequent smiling, positive facial displays, direct body orientation, and head nodding. Cold behaviors, again in order of intensity, included giveing a cold stare, sneering, yawning, frowning, moving away, shaking the head negatively, and looking away.

Based upon these descriptions, the researchers constucted videotaped interactions in which an actress depicted either totally warm or totally cold cues throughout, or a warm to cold/cold to warm combination. Interestingly enough, the subjects who viewed the tapes found the depiction in which the actress shifted from warm cues to cold cues less attractive than all others, including the totally negative, "cold" portrayal. Two intriguing possibilities emerged from this study. First, the subjects selections of positive and negative cues tended to

cluster around the same behaviors, suggesting that relational definition may be accomplished by a fairly narrow range of cues. Secondly the finding that an evolution from positive cues to negative cues by the actress yielded the most extreme negative responses from subjects might parallel the responses individuals experience toward one another as their relationships approach termination.

Direct information on the ways in which nonverbal cues operate in relational crises has been reported in the clinical studies comparing distressed and nondistressed marriages. Early research in this area had posited that global ratings of marital satisfaction were related to the relative frequencies of instrumental behaviors (those necessary for the survival of the dyad as a social and economic unit), and affectional behaviors (those used to convey warmth, attraction, approval or affection). Differences between distressed and nondistressed couples were found primarily in the affectional area(Kotlar, 1962; Levinger, 1964). Since affectional displays were heavily weighted with nonverbal behaviors (e.g., spouse touched me pleasantly, etc.), research inevitably turned toward more pointed investigations of the positive and negative dimensions of spouse behaviors.

In a study of seven nondistressed couples, Wills, Wiess, and Patterson (1974) asked each couple to complete a behavioral checklist on their spouses' behaviors daily for two weeks as

a measure of pleasant/unpleasant instrumental behaviors. Spousal pleasant/ unpleasant affectional behaviors were recorded by event recorders the subject carrier during the times both spouses were home together. Results indicated that while pleasurable behaviors outnumbered displeasurable behaviors substantially, the latter had a greater influence on partners' perceptions of marital satisfaction on a day-to-day basis. Moreover, couples demonstrated a tendency to reciprocate displeasurable behaviors more readily than was the case with pleasurable behaviors. Finally a significant sex difference emerged in terms of preferred spouse behavior, with husbands emphasizing pleasurable instrumental behaviors and wives emphasizing pleasurable affectional behaviors.

A series of studies undertaken by the Gottman group, (Gottman, 1979; Gottman, Markman, and Notarius, 1977; Gottman, 1980) explored the nonverbal elements of marital communication in considerably greater detail, using videotaped records of distressed and nondistressed couples as the principle unit of analysis. The findings from these studies vividly illustrated differences in nonverbal displays between distressed and non-distressed couples.

Specifically, Gottman, Markman, and Notarius (1977) videotaped fourteen distressed and fourteen nondistressed couples who had been asked to discusss a previously identified marital problem and come to a mutually agreeable resolution "before

the camera". Elements coded for each dyad included content (verbatim verbal account), affect (nonverbal display by the speakers) and context (nonverbal displays by the listeners). The profile for distressed couples was distinguished by five characteristics: agreement with neutral affect; expressing feelings about a problem with negative affect; mindreading with negative affect; agreement with negative affect; and disagreement with negative affect. For obvious reasons, the researchers concluded that nonverbal behaviors were better discriminators of distressed and nondistressed couples than verbal behaviors,

In a similar vein, Jacobson, Waldrom and Moore (1980), Jacobson (1980) and Vincent, Friedman, Nugent and Messerly (1979) reported data supporting the inference that nonverbal behaviors, particularly those which functioned as metamessages to verbal interactions, were powerful indicators of relational deterioration. Arguing for cross-situational consistency of the observed nonverbal behaviors exhibited by spouses, Gottman stated:

> The most useful dimension of nonverbal behavior in describing relationship formation ...and its continuing functioning is a positive/negative affect dimension.
>
> (Gottman, 1980,p.712)

A final study of newlywed couples reported by Beier and Sternberg (1977) indicated that certain nonverbal cues displayed couples' level of accord or discord during a twenty minute

interview. Fifty-one couples were divided into four groups based upon their level of agreement/disagreement on a paper and pencil test of marital agreement. Couples who experienced the lowest levels of disagreement sat closer together, looked at one another more often and for longer time periods, touched one another more, and held their legs in more open positions than couples who reported the most disagreement.

When combined with the more clinically oriented studies, Beier and Sternberg's (1977) data suggested that nonverbal behaviors may indeed index the quality of marital relationships. There were, however, four broad issues which characterized this literature and limited the applicability of obtained findings. An obvious problem stems from the demand characteristics introduced by the situations and measures used in these studies. A degree of artifact was inevitably introduced in those studies which literally trained couples to identify instrumental and affectional behaviors for the purpose of maintaining daily logs. Subject reactivity was unavoidable and the effects undetectable.

Similarly, the ecological validity was suspect in a number of the studies. The liklihood that many couples spend a portion of their day-to-day interactions taking turns creating stories linking TAT pictures, a sentence at a time seemed remote. Also, relatively few couples seemed likely to remain unaffected by the presence of video equipment and technicians. The descriptive

accuracy of the behaviors spouses exhibited may have been as high as Gottman (1980) contended, but it was almost certainly affected by the environmental conditions of the data collection.

A more troublesome liability of the clinical studies so far as the present study is concerned evolved from the coding procedures for nonverbal behaviors. Procedures yielded quite respectable inter-rater reliabilities, but the categories used were not particularly well operationalized. Anyone familiar with the literature on affect recognition in vocal cues might blanch at descriptors such as "bouyant" or "bubbly", which the coders were to evaluate in the spouses vocal behavior. Coders were instructed to scan behaviors hierarchically, after Mehrabian's (1972) procedure, from face to voice, to bodily cues to determine whether the affect accompanying a spoken message was positive, negative or neutral. Any procedures employed to avoid or offset interactive effects of physical appearance, dress, or other potential confounds were unreported, as were the training procedures for coders.

A final and familiar complaint lodged against the clinical literature concerned the small sample sizes reported in most of the studies. The diversity of relational styles possible among couples made the generality of reported findings somewhat suspect. In this regard, it should be noted that the comparability

of results obtained across a series of populations afforded a modicum of confidence. Combined with the metamessage studies from the nonverbal literature, the clinical studies indicated that the relationship between nonverbal cues and relational terminations was worthy of closer scrutiny.

Based upon these literatures, the following issues framed our investigation. Parks (1977), among others, has noted that most studies of relational communication have been verbal analyses of marital and family groups. He argued persuasively for an extension of research into different contexts (e.g. employer/employee, dating relationships, etc.) and for examination of nonverbal behaviors. Special attention to the frequency and patterning of behaviors has been widely recommended, rather than recording the mere occurence of various cues. Gottman (1980) also has stressed the need for purely descriptive research probes which identify and isolate rather than coalesce and obscure relevant phenomena. To address these needs, this preliminary analysis of the nonverbal apects of developing and deteriorating dating relationships among college students was undertaken. Our interest at this stage was expressed in the research question: what nonverbal behaviors do college students consider most important in defining successful and deteriorating dating relationships?

Method

Subjects

Participants in this study were 200 students, one hundred male and one hundred female, at the University of Missouri. The average age was 19.8 (range=18-23). All students were single and reported having had at least one "commited" dating relationship. Commitment as used here was defined as a mutual agreement of individuals to date only one another, lasting at least three months. (Note: the definition for a commited relationship was generated by a pilot population). Respondents reported an average of 2.4 relationships in their experience.

Measurement

In order to obtain useful data from a college population, it was necessary to first determine the dimensions the group viewed as salient. To this end, pilot research was conducted to obtain from 40 students, twenty females and twenty males, an extensive list of the nonverbal behaviors they recalled from their own successful dating relationships. Their responses were used to construct the measure used in the study. For inclusion on the checklist, a specific behavior had to be listed by 60% of the pilot population. While this criterion was reasonably stringent, there was a remarkably high degree of agreement among the respondents' listings.

One possible drawback to the self-report technique used in this preliminary project was that respondents' abilities to recall accurately might be suspect, or tinged by stereotypic notions about what "ought to be" characteristic nonverbal behaviors in relationships. The only reasonable alternative, however, seemed infeasible. The method of choice, direct observation, would not only have been prohibitively difficult and expensive, but would also introduce reactivity problems. The Clore, et al (1975) option of providing respondents with a researcher-created list of behaviors seemed undesirable as well, as it was a less direct measure of respondents' own perceptions and could conceivably have omitted behaviors that the population of interest deemed salient.

Using the 60% criterion, the nonverbal checklist used in this study was composed of the following twelve cues.

Whispering *
Nibbling
Smiling
Holding Hands
Gazing into each others eyes
Hugging
Laughing
Lovemaking
Winking
Arm in Arm
Kissing
Tickling

*While we recognized that whispering was in the strictest sense a verbal activity, it was used so often as a descriptor that we elected to include it, as a measure of vocal activity.

Procedure

Data were collected in the following way. Checklists with accompanying instructions were distributed to students living in one men's and one women's residence hall at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Respondents completed the ranking task anonymously, reporting only their age, sex, marital status, and the number of "commited" relationships they had experienced. Completed checklists were deposited in the mailrooms of each residence hall.

All respondents were instructed to complete the checklist in the following way. They were asked to rank, in terms of the frequency of occurence for the behavior, the five most important cues in either a successful,or alternatively, a deteriorating relationship. Our rationale for emphasizing the frequency of occurence was simple. We reasoned that one important measure of a cue's salience was the frequency of use. By asking respondents to rank order the cues in this way, we hoped to obtain a more descriptively rich profile of relationships among the target population.

In either dormitory 110 residents received a copy of the checklist. 55 were asked to identify the behaviors, in rank order of frequency, associated with successful relationships. The remaining 55 received the same checklist, but were requested to identify the behaviors that would indicate the relationship was about to end. Again, the rankings

were to be done by frequency, but in this instance, the subjects indicated the five cues which would disappear from the relationship first.

Results

Return rates for both male and femal residence halls averaged above 97%. Comparisons were made on fifty randomly selected checklists from each of the four groups: female, successful relationships; female, deteriorating relationships; male, successful relationships; and male, deteriorating relationships.

Results of the rankings for successful relationships are presented in Table 1. Only those cues which were ranked in the top five a minimum of twenty-five times are depicted.

Insert Table 1 about here

In general, these data indicated that there are more similarities than differences between the sexes in their perceptions of which cues occur most frequently in their dating relationships. Both sexes documented the significance of touch as a salient ingredient in their interactions, although the specific tactile cues identified were somewhat different. Similarly, males and females alike described in their rankings the importance

of positive affect displays in successful relationships, as smiling, gazing and laughing all emerged as frequently used cues.

Table 2 presents the results of the rankings provided for deteriorating relationships. Here some intriguing differences emerged in the perceptions of the sexes concerning which behaviors disappeared from the relationships first. It would appear that for males, expressions of affect disappear before displays of affection. Females, by contrast, reported that an affectionate cue, kissing, was the first behavior to occur less frequently in a dissolving relationship. Finally, it should be noted that the nonverbal cues respondents identified as most frequent in successful relationships were closely paralleled by the rankings provided on cues that would disappear first from a deteriorating relationship.

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion and Implications

The present study was a preliminary probe into the nature of nonverbal cues in defining developing and deteriorating dating relationships. As such, the focus was exclusively on description, and in the absence of an empirical literature

against which obtained results could be measured, any and all inferences must necessarily be couuched in high tentative language. This admonition notwithstanding, the following observations seemed warranted.

The results of the current analysis were generally consistent with previous literature in nonverbal communication. The cues respondents ranked as most characteristic of their relationships were those which a wide variety of studies not specific to dating relationships suggested were relevant. Of even greater significance, however, was the correspondence between the reports of subjects in this study and the observational data obtained in the distressed couples literature. In the latter case, the power of negative nonverbal affect as a discriminator between distressed and nondistressed couples was a major finding (Gottman, 1979; Beier and Sternberg, 1977). That tendency seemed apparent in our respondents' descriptions of their experiences in deteriorating relationships, particularly with regard to decreases in eye contact, smiling, and laughter. We suspect that this particular configuration of affective cues may operate as a general index of the quality of male/female relationships. As such, their disappearance may function as subtle, yet pervasive signals of relational decay. Further probes, preferably behavioral observations, will be required to determine whether this is the case for

dating relationships to the degree that appears to be the case in marital relationships.

Although our data revealed some modest sex differences, particularly in the sequencing of cues for deteriorating relationships, the impulse toward over-interpretation must be resisted. In a sample of this size, using an instrument generated exclusively from peer perceptions, the discrepancies that emerged in males' and females' rankings did not seem unduly remarkable. Further studies using alternative strategies and measures are indicated before any statements regarding the relative perception or perceptiveness of either sex in charting the evolution of relationships can be made.

Comparatively little is known about the ways in which individuals terminate their relationships. The current study suggested that nonverbal cues may be important elements in that process. To be sure, the recurrent cry for future research aimed toward clarification and greater specification is echoed here. In view of the commonly held belief that relational messages are quite frequently nonverbal, a sustained effort could enrich our understanding of interpersonal communication immeasurably.

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TABLE 1

RANKINGS OF NONVERBAL CUES IN SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIPS

	Females (n=50)	Males (n=50)
Behaviors	1. Kissing (46)*	1. Kissing (43) *
	2. Smiling (38)	2. Lovemaking (35)
	3. Hugging (34)	3. Hugging (34)
	4. Holding Hands (33)	4. Laughing (33)
	5. Gazing (29)	5. Smiling (32)
	6. Laughing (26)	6. Gazing (27)

*Numbers presented in parentheses refer to the number of times a behavior was ranked as the five most frequent behaviors.

TABLE 2

RANKINGS OF NONVERBAL CUES IN DETERIORATING RELATIONSHIPS

	Females (n=50)	Males (n=50)
Behaviors	1. Kissing (40)*	1. Laughing (38)*
	2. Laughing (35)	2. Gazing (29)
	3. Gazing (32)	3. Holding Hands (28)
	4. Smiling (32)	4. Kissing (27)
	5. Hugging (27)	5. Lovemaking (26)
	6. Lovemaking (25)	6. Smiling (25)

*Numbers presented in parentheses refer to the number of of times a behavior appeared in the top five ranks.